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ABSTRACT

A survey examined attitudes toward internally generated school priorities among 29 elementary school teachers, 1 principal, and 278 parents in a small rural Wisconsin school district. Respondents comprised all educators in the district's only elementary school and the parents of 85 percent of the school's students. The 26-item survey examined perceptions of school priorities in the areas of curriculum development, instructional technology, character education, and parent involvement in school. Ratings of the composite school priority areas did not differ significantly between educators and parents, and the rankings of specific priorities by educators and parents were highly correlated. Both groups gave the highest priority rankings to instruction in basic reading, writing, and mathematics; teaching of respect and responsible behavior; and relevance to real life. Both groups' lowest priorities were related to increasing parent involvement and access to various technologies. The results indicate that these parents and educators agreed more closely about school priorities than is generally portrayed in popular and academic media. Recommendations are offered for rural school improvement and school communication with parents. Contains 20 references and 7 data tables. (SV)

Analysis of Differences Between Educator and Parent Perceptions of Rural Elementary School Priorities

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Abstract

Rural elementary public school educators (n=30) and parents (n=272) responded to a twenty-six item survey about their perceptions of elementary school priorities for: (1) curriculum development; (2) instructional technology; (3) character education; and, (4) parent/school involvement. Based upon response to a Lickert Scale, educators and parents displayed no significant difference in rating the composite school priority areas. Interestingly, however, both possessed a high correlation of responses for the ranking of such as school priorities. Data indicated that educators and parents were in greater concordance with each other regarding elementary school priorities than was often erroneously presented and accepted through various public mediums. Results suggested that rural elementary school priorities focus upon: (a) increased standards for acceptable rural school performance; (b) educator responsibility for establishment of rural school priorities; (c) rural parent responsibility for character education; and, (d) a reframed role of technology in rural education.

Analysis of Differences Between Educator and Parent Perceptions of Rural Elementary School Priorities

The changing values and attitudes of American society during the latter half of the twentieth century, especially in rural settings, have had a profound impact on both families and schools. To understand more clearly some of the important changes rural schools were consequentially experiencing, it was important to examine external parental perceptions of internally generated school priorities. Research (e.g. Acosta, 1992) suggested that parental support of any school-wide priorities were one of the best assurances of public school success.

There existed an array of studies ranging from national to local levels (e.g. Harris & Associates, 1991, Nanaimo School District #68, 1991, etc.) that indicated community and employers' beliefs about the products of the public school system, namely its graduates, were marginal in functional literacy and skills. Resultantly those external constituencies called for a desired voice in the establishment of school priorities. Of additional concern were the perceptions held by public school constituencies ranging from beliefs to expectations (Banathy, 1991; Basom and Crandall, 1991; Rallis and Phlegar, 1990). Interestingly, however, were Martin-Kneip's 1992 findings where parent and community stakeholders were equally divided as to a favored change versus a defended satisfaction with their schools.

In order to gain a knowledge based perspective of parental involvement in school prioritization it was appropriate to include a comparative education viewpoint. Of the US Department of Education's 1991 International Assessment of Educational Progress, only Canada, Switzerland and Brazil joined the United States in having state or local

control of education. Accordingly, Wikeley and Hughes (1995), found there existed little evidence that parents were altogether supportive of current educational reform movements. Wikeley and Hughes (1995) further raised the issue that the notion of parental empowerment within schools did not emanate from parents themselves but rather a small influential group of educators. Thus support for parental partnerships with schools appeared to be largely local rather than national or state level issues. For example, the Ontario Parent Council (1994) found that there existed no uniform structure that permitted or promoted parental involvement in public schools in an equivalent manner. By 1995, in the United States, the Institute for Educational Leadership found that while 69% of parents said it was "extremely important" to spend time at home encouraging their children in schoolwork, only 43% of those same parents believed it was "extremely important" for them to be directly involved in their children's schools.

Another concern that upheld the need for the study was the condition of education in rural America. In 1995 the US Office of Educational Research and Improvement found that rural educators comprised approximately one-quarter of the nation's public school workforce but were younger, had less professional experience, lower levels of education and received smaller salaries than non-rural counterparts. Rural students made up 17 percent of the nation's public school-age children but attended 28% of the country's schools. Rural public schools' communal diversity had created a concentration of low-paying employment that resulted in significant levels of poverty and associated problems that affected communities, families and schools. Reynolds and Gill's (1994) investigation of a similar inconsistent educational setting - inner city schools- found that parental involvement in their children's education was: (1)

overestimated; (2) estimated primarily from student or teacher reports; and, (3) did not yield clear-cut results.

Studies have also shown a close correspondence between parents' goals about appropriate education and the programs they desire their children to be enrolled (Stipek et al., 1992). Thus, rural educators generally had two choices for responding to parental influence or pressure in pursuing school priorities: (1) succumb; or (2) inform and educate parents about those priorities. The purpose of the study was the latter - to inform parents while prioritizing school improvement endeavors.

Method

School location and subjects. The general setting for the study was a K-12 public school district that was ranked as the 222nd smallest in size of 370 school districts within the State of Wisconsin. The school district was composed of one elementary, middle and high school respectively. The school district's total per pupil budgeted cost was $5,784 which placed it at 92.7% of the 1995 statewide average. The specific setting was the K-6 elementary school that had a student enrollment of 372 and a professional educator staff of 30. Subjects were educators (n=30) and parents (n=236) in a rural Midwestern community with a population of 5,889.

Procedure. A survey instrument was developed to reflect four general areas of local elementary school priority interests in consultation with the Lac Superieur Educational Research Center© of the University of Wisconsin-Superior. Subjects responded to a twenty-five item survey about their perceptions of the public elementary school's priorities for: (1) curriculum development; (2) instructional technology; (3) character education; and, (4) parent/school involvement. In addition, an overall rating of

the elementary school's performance was also included on the instrument. A five point Lickert Scale (i.e. 5=Very Strongly Agree to 1=Very Strongly Disagree) was used to rate each item with the exception of the overall rating (i.e. item #26) which was assigned as a letter grade (i.e. A,B,C,D,F).

The survey instrument was distributed to the rural district's elementary school 278 parents, 29 elementary teachers and 1 building principal. Despite an elementary student enrollment of 372 the original total parent sample size was limited to 278 in order to eliminate duplicate parent responses by those parents who had more than one child enrolled in the elementary school. The response rate by parents was 84.8% and 100% by educators. Instruments and an accompanying explanation letter were sent home with students. There was a one week time limit by which parents were to complete and return responses. Had the 42 parent responses that were returned after the deadline been tabulated within the study, parental return rate would have been equal to that of the educators at 100%.

Data Analysis. A planned family-wise multiple comparison procedure (MCP) of the *t*-test was identified as necessary for the study's data analysis given the pairwise contrasts between the educator and parent samples. The contrast based Dunn (1961) procedure (a.k.a. Bonferroni technique) was selected as the most appropriate MCP because of its flexibility and capacity to be used with any planned contrast of interest. The method used the standard t-test statistic with the important exception that alpha was split up among the planned contrasts between educator and parent samples. Accordingly, the family-wise Type I error rate was maintained at $\propto$. Rosenthal and Rosnow (1985) noted that $\propto$ need not be distributed equally among the set of contrasts, as long as the sum of individual $\propto_{pc}$ was equal to $\propto_{fw}$.

To further control for possible Type I error, the *t*-test for independent samples was used to calculate the *t*-test statistic prior to hypothesis testing using the Dunn Method. Apriori $\propto$ was established at $\rho \geq .05$.

Results

Overall. Data (see table 1) indicated that both educators and parents rated the composite perception of important elementary school priorities at the strongly agree level (**X**=4.01) with the educators rating (**X**=4.17) slightly greater than that of the parents (**X**=3.85). There was also an overall equivalent letter grade rating for the school (i.e. B-) by both educators and parents as individual populations and when collectively pooled. When the pooled mean perception ratings were compared to numerically converted letter grade values for both populations, there was no significant difference between the overall perception of the importance school priorities and overall performance rating of the school.

Ranked priorities. Comparison between educator mean ranked priorities (see table 2) and parent mean ranked priorities (see table 3) indicated some interesting although not statistically significant data. In the highest elementary school priority ratings, educators ranked (**n**=10) more than twice the number of parent ranked (**n**=4) school priorities (i.e. very strongly agree). Both populations agreed on basic literacy curricular priorities (i.e. reading and mathematics) but the educators additionally rated character education items (e.g. responsible behavior, respect for authority, etc.) as highest priorities whereas the parents did not. Both educators and parents, however, generally rated the technology priorities as the lowest. Both populations agreed with all identified elementary school priorities and there was no disagreement by either

population with any priority.

Priority areas. There was equal rating order between educators and parents in the identified importance of elementary school priority areas (see table 4). The pooled educator and parent priority ratings by elementary areas were: (1st) *curriculum* (**X**=4.535); (2nd) *character education* (**X**=4.069); (3rd) *technology* (**X**=3.617); and, (4th) *parent involvement* (**X**=3.573). Based upon response to the five point Lickert Scale, educators and parents demonstrated no overall significant difference (***t***=1.856) (see table 5) by the Dunn Procedure in rating the composite school priority areas. Nor was there any significant difference found in any of the four individual school priority areas.

Ranked differences. Use of descriptive data ranked differences between educator and parent ratings of the 25 individual elementary school priorities (see table 6) found no difference in the curricular areas of reading and mathematics to support the earlier noted importance of those priorities. Over one-half (**n**=14/25) of the individual priority items had either no or one difference in rank between educators and parents. The mean ranked difference between educators and parents for all 25 priority items was 1.92.

Additional analyses. A series of supplementary data analyses were performed purely for additional statistical verification of findings (see table 7). None yielded any significant results. Interestingly, however, both educators and parents possessed a high correlation of responses (**rho** = .926) for the ranking of elementary school priorities.

Discussion

Results indicated that educators and parents were in greater concordance with each other regarding elementary school priorities than was stereotypically presented

and accepted through various public and academic mediums. Overall, parents and educators had no significant differences in the priority of school improvement efforts. Enhancing the results was the high degree of association between educator and parental prioritized rankings. Such appeared to strongly support previous research findings (e.g. Institute for Educational Leadership, 1995) to conclude that parents take their role as their child's "first teacher" seriously but feel more comfortable in assuming that role in the home rather than the school.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, caution was maintained in interpreting and deriving deductive conclusions from the data. The insights gained represented a rural construct of reality, an important but not necessarily definite portrayal of rural education itself. Nevertheless, the study's progressive rural assertion did suggest the following reasonable efforts be undertaken by rural schools:

1. ***Increased standards for acceptable rural school performance***. Neither rural educators or parents gave the elementary school an overall stellar performance rating. Although a B- grade may be deemed acceptable by some, such was clearly not representative of outstanding effort or achievement. In a statement, US Secretary of Education Richard Riley aptly commented, "A watered down curriculum and low expectations for too many of our students prevent them from meeting high standards" (Riley, 1993). Rural elementary schools can no longer continue to ignore those teaching methodologies that had proven capability to produce the kind of learner achievement outcomes demanded by the public (Stone, 1996).
2. ***Educator responsibility for establishment of rural school priorities***. Given the concordance of agreement by parents with educator established rural elementary school priorities, educators were encouraged to employ best professional judgment

and expertise to advance state-of-the-art educational opportunities and experiences for learners. Although data indicated endorsement of those priorities by parents failure by the school to keep parents informed about such was likely to have resulted in both immediate and long-term adverse school-community relations. That possibility may have had even greater consequence given the intimate and communal dynamics of rural locales.

3. ***Rural parent responsibility for character education***. Results of the study indicated a very strong agreement among parents and educators that the highest priority of the rural elementary school was anchored in functional literacy and curricular areas of reading and mathematics. Although rural educators gave highest priority ratings to character education items rural parents clearly did not concur. Those data appeared to support the Institute for Educational Leadership (1995) research findings. Further, rural public school adherence to its fundamental curricular role and scope may well have had a proactive effect of minimizing or eliminating secular intrusion into those very areas by citizen groups with a fanatical interest as occurred in 1987-88 in several rural Washington and Oregon communities over the Holt, Rinehart & Winston *Impression* reading series (People for the American Way, 1990).
4. ***Reframed role of technology in rural education***. The role and use of even common technology (e.g. calculator) for young learners in public schools was not without controversy (Bitter & Hatfield, 1993). It was also unequivocal that educational leaders recognized technology as an essential tool required for success in the present global environment of which rural communities were not insular. The data indicated, however, that technology was not a perceived high priority by either

rural educators or parents. Like the Ojibway of the 1830's (Kohl, 1860) who tried to hold on to old ways in a world of rapid change, rural elementary schools cannot set aside the imminent reality of technology. The study suggested that technology issues for rural elementary schools required reframing so as to permit a relevant, yet responsive, prioritization to the technological reality of a knowledge based global community.

The meaningfulness of the study rested not in its statistical significance but rather the lack of such. Data indicated that there truly were no significant differences between educators and parents on both individual school improvement priority items and areas. Those data gave credence to educators' professional judgment in identifying and prioritizing school improvement initiatives considering that parental endorsement of such was likely to be supportive. A point of caution was warranted, however. That being, educators should not have been lulled into a false sense of security in prioritizing rural school improvement efforts. Despite the fact that research may not have yielded significant differences between educator and parental priorities, it was unwise to not to continued similar investigations if for nothing else than to validate the existence of insignificance that could have been construed as meaningful endorsement of internally generated school priorities. A suggested follow-up study was in order, however, to ascertain the effectiveness of the rural elementary school in truly educating the parents about those priorities.

Table 1. Difference Between Educator and Parent Assigned Letter Grade and Sigma Perception Rating for Rural Elementary School

Sample	Overall Prioritization	Letter Grade
Educators*	4.17 (B-)	B- (4.23)
Parents*	3.85 (C+)	B- (4.05)
Combined*	4.01 (B-)	B- (4.14)

* No Significant Difference at $\rho \geq .05$ using *t*-test for independent samples.

Note: Letter Grade based upon scale of:

- grade = .00 - .32
letter grade = .33 - .65
+ grade = .66 - .99

Table 2. Ranked Σ Mean Educator Perception Ratings of Rural Elementary School Priorities.

Priority	Mean	Priority Level
Basic Reading & Writing	5.00	Very Strongly Agree
Read to Understand & Enjoy	4.93	(4.50 - 5.00)
Basic Mathematics	4.93	
Mathematic Problem Solving	4.87	
Relevance to Real Life	4.80	
Teach Respect for Peers	4.83	
Subject Area Connection	4.77	
Teach Responsible Behavior	4.77	
Teach Respect for Authority	4.67	
Parent/Teacher Conferences	4.50	
Art Program	4.43	Strongly Agree
Physical Education Program	4.37	(3.50 - 4.49)
Music Program	4.37	
Computer Keyboarding	4.30	
Computer Access	4.30	
Parent Opportunities	3.83	
Being Unusually Good	3.67	
World Wide Web Access	3.63	
Monthly Notes Home	3.63	
School Newsletter	3.50	
Information Notes to Home	3.47	Agree
E-Mail Access	3.37	(2.50 - 3.49)
More Parent Involvement	3.33	
Child Progress Information	3.17	
C.A.R.E. Program	3.10	
None		Strongly Disagree (1.50 - 2.49)
None		Very Strongly Disagree (0 - 1.49)

Table 3. Ranked $\sum$ Mean Parent Perception Ratings of Rural Elementary School Priorities.

Priority	Mean	Priority Level
Basic Reading & Writing	4.89	Very Strongly Agree
Read to Understand & Enjoy	4.82	(4.50 - 5.00)
Basic Mathematics	4.85	
Mathematic Problem Solving	4.55	
Relevance to Real Life	4.35	Strongly Agree
Teach Respect for Peers	4.24	(3.50 - 4.49)
Subject Area Connection	4.16	
Teach Responsible Behavior	4.21	
Teach Respect for Authority	4.19	
Computer Keyboarding	4.18	
Computer Access	4.10	
Physical Education Program	4.00	
Parent/Teacher Conferences	3.98	
Art Program	3.79	
Music Program	3.77	
School Newsletter	3.58	
Parent Opportunities	3.56	
Being Unusually Good	3.56	
Monthly Notes Home	3.53	
Information Notes to Home	3.45	Agree
C.A.R.E. Program	3.45	(2.50 - 3.49)
Child Progress Information	3.31	
More Parent Involvement	3.19	
World Wide Web Access	2.61	
E-Mail Access	2.45	
None		Strongly Disagree (1.50 - 2.49)
None		Very Strongly Disagree (0 - 1.49)

Table 4. Educator and Parent Mean Perception Ratings for Rural Elementary School Priority Areas.

Priority Area	Educators	Parents	Pooled
Curriculum	4.718	4.353	4.535
Character Education	4.208	3.930	4.069
Technology	3.900	3.335	3.617
Parent Involvement	3.632	3.514	3.573
Σ	4.174	3.854	4.014

Table 5. Difference Between Educator and Parent Perceptions By Rural Elementary School Priority Areas.

	Educators X	Parents X	*t*	*v*	Critical Value
Curriculum	4.718	4.353	2.121	9	2.677
Technology	3.900	3.335	1.080	4	3.481
Character Education	4.208	3.930	0.712	6	2.959
Parent Involvement	3.632	3.514	0.624	7	2.832
Σ	4.174	3.854	1.856	26	2.373

Note: Apriori $\propto$ established at $\rho \geq .05$ with t-test for independent samples at 2 tailed critical value using Dunn's (Bonferroni's) Procedure.

Table 6. Ranked Differences Between Educator and Parent Ratings of Rural Elementary School Priorities.

Priority	Educator Rank	Parent Rank	Rank Difference
World Wide Web Access	19	24	5
Computer Keyboarding	14	9	5
C.A.R.E. Program	25	21	4
School Newsletter	20	16	4
Computer Access	15	11	4
E-Mail Access	22	25	3
Art Program	11	14	3
Parent/Teacher Conferences	10	13	3
Subject Area Connection	7	10	3
Music Program	13	15	2
Child Progress Information	24	22	2
Information Notes to Home	21	20	1
Monthly Notes Home	18	19	1
Being Unusually Good	17	18	1
Parent Opportunities	16	17	1
Teach Respect for Authority	9	8	1
Teach Responsible Behavior	8	7	1
Relevance to Real Life	6	5	1
Teach Respect for Peers	5	6	1
Basic Mathematics	3	2	1
Read to Understand & Enjoy	2	3	1
More Parent Involvement	23	23	0
Physical Education Program	12	12	0
Mathematic Problem Solving	4	4	0
Basic Reading & Writing	1	1	0
		X =	**1.92**

Table 7. Miscellaneous Data Analysis of Educator and Parent Perceptions of Rural Elementary School Priorities.

Data Analysis	Statistic	$p \geq .05$
ANOVA	**F**= 3.445 (1/50)	Nonsignificant
Kruskal-Wallis	***H*** = 3.184 (1df)	Nonsignificant
Ranked Correlation	**rho** = .926	Nonsignificant
Pearson Correlation	**r** = .865	Nonsignificant

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